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Youth gangs in a remote Indigenous community: Importance of cultural authority and family support

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Abstract

The Indigenous community of Wadeye in the Northern Territory, Australia has been described as a community 'under siege from continual gang violence' (Rioting flares again at Wadeye. The Australian 7 August; Gang violence plagues Wadeye. ABC News 1 December; Wadeye worst in 50 years. NT News 2 November). The gangs appear to have emerged in the early 1980s and are generally defined through youth aligning themselves along cultural, clan and family affiliations into groups with contemporary Americanised gang characteristics, symbolic links with heavy metal music and clearly defined turf boundaries. Although they do engage in some relatively minor drug (predominately cannabis) distribution for profit, the rationale for these groups appears to be either as a provocative and offensive structure, or at other times as a defence mechanism. Despite the portrayal of gangs as the focus of criminal activity in the community, there has been little research to explore the relationship between the gangs and the criminal profile of the community. Nor has there been research that examines gang activity from the perspective of the members or within a broader community context. Without this level of understanding, it is very difficult to design interventions that meet the needs of youth in the community. This paper presents data from a survey of young people who were involved in gangs in Wadeye and interviews with gang members who were incarcerated in Darwin Correctional Centre.

Keywords

community, importance, cultural, authority, family, support, gangs, remote, youth, indigenous

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Foreword | *Wadeye is one of the largest Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. Over the past decade, the community has attracted much negative media attention because of the amount of violence that has occurred. This violence has often been portrayed as the result of gang activity.*

This paper examines how gangs operate in the Wadeye community and provides some insight into the perceptions of gang members on their relationships with community authority structures and family support mechanisms.

The researchers found that the criminal aspects of gang membership may be less important than factors such as identity construction, experiments with leadership and preservation of knowledge about culture and history.

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Youth gangs in a remote Indigenous community: Importance of cultural authority and family support

Teresa Cunningham, Bill Ivory, Richard Chenhall,
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The Indigenous community of Wadeye in the Northern Territory, Australia has been described as a community 'under siege from continual gang violence' (Rioting flares again at Wadeye. *The Australian* 7 August. www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22195888-2702,00.html; Gang violence plagues Wadeye. *ABC News* 1 December. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-12-01/gang-violence-plagues-wadeye/224208>; Wadeye worst in 50 years. *NT News* 2 November. http://www.ntnews.com.au/article/2012/11/02/314788_ntnews.html). The gangs appear to have emerged in the early 1980s and are generally defined through youth aligning themselves along cultural, clan and family affiliations into groups with contemporary Americanised gang characteristics, symbolic links with heavy metal music and clearly defined turf boundaries. Although they do engage in some relatively minor drug (predominately cannabis) distribution for profit, the rationale for these groups appears to be either as a provocative and offensive structure, or at other times as a defence mechanism. Despite the portrayal of gangs as the focus of criminal activity in the community, there has been little research to explore the relationship between the gangs and the criminal profile of the community. Nor has there been research that examines gang activity from the perspective of the members or within a broader community context. Without this level of understanding, it is very difficult to design interventions that meet the needs of youth in the community. This paper presents data from a survey of young people who were involved in gangs in Wadeye and interviews with gang members who were incarcerated in Darwin Correctional Centre.

The emergence of youth gangs in Wadeye

Ivory (2009) considered that between 2002 and 2004, there were 14 distinct gangs operating in the Wadeye region. Often, these gangs took their names and identity from heavy metal music, thus a prominent gang was (and continues to be) the Judas Priest Gang. Another gang, the Evil Warriors, according to one gang member purportedly link their identity to the

history of the warrior Namarluk who, in the early part of the 20th century, fought against outside intrusion from colonialists and consistently outwitted non-Indigenous attempts to capture him. Although the majority of gangs were comprised of male members, Ivory (2009) described the existence of at least one girls' gang, the Kylie Girls in 2009, and more had appeared during the time of this study (eg Madonna Mob and the Celine Dion gang).

Ages of members in the younger gangs generally range from about seven to 14 years (Ivory 2009). However, with the older and more powerful groups, the ages range from about 15 to 25 years. Ivory (2009) noted however that a few members were in their 30s. It should be noted that since Ivory's research, some gang participants have moved into mainstream activities such as involvement on the local shire council and working for the Thamarrur Regional Aboriginal Council on cultural programs aiming to create more purposeful roles for young adults who were from gangs.

Another important theme that arises out of Ivory's ethnography is one of leadership. He argues that

[a] key prerequisite to be a leader of one of the youth groups is the ability to fight, to think strategically and to communicate and relate to other gang members (Ivory 2009: 320).

Gang leaders, he argues display strong leadership qualities and sometimes, in their own descriptions, they emphasise that their leadership emerged due to their frustrations with the leadership demonstrated by the elder men of the community (Ivory 2009).

In terms of the impact of gang membership on family and community networks, the causal model of gang development suggests that gang membership usually results in the dislocation of gang members from their family and community. Neighbourhood level variables (eg disorganisation, concentrated disadvantage, poverty) and family-structured variables (eg parental education, family structure) generally exert influence on the risk of gang membership indirectly through the inhibition of pro-social bonds. Therefore, the weakening of conventional bonds (eg parental and school attachment) elevates risk for antisocial behaviour (eg delinquent

peer association) and the internalisation of antisocial values (eg delinquent beliefs; Howell & Egely 2005).

White (2009) discussed the connection between gang and family membership in a suburban Darwin context where the family was the gang. He states that

in the case of Indigenous young people, the gang and family connection is unique insofar as the colonial experience reinforces an 'Othering' process that is distinctive and specific to this group (White 2009: 47).

This network can therefore engender and maintain feelings of respect and admiration for other gang members and those in positions of authority within gangs and consequently be perceived as providing a safe environment and as a protector at both a family and community level.

The youth gangs in Wadeye have evolved in an environment that is characterised by substantial social and economic disadvantage. Taylor (2010: 48) describes the community as being 'very much at the cross roads' in addressing this disadvantage in the sense that, although identified as a community that will be provided with increased infrastructure and program funding, these initiatives will only benefit the community if adult dependency on welfare is addressed and the working-age population are provided with opportunities to become providers rather than just consumers of resources.

Issues faced by the community include the quality and quantity of the housing, the availability of employment and the educational achievements of children. A recent Council of Australian Governments' service delivery trial model comments on the conditions of 'endemic social dislocation and community violence' that residents of Wadeye had to endure (Gray 2006: 10). Youth groups may be responsible for some of this dysfunction, but it would be equally fair to say that young people grow up in circumstances that are characterised by violence and unpredictability. The formation of gangs, which may have benefits of social capital for their members, may be considered to be as much a response to this community environment as the cause of it.

Gangs are generally linked with criminal behaviour, even though they may consist

of members who only spend time together 'hanging out' rather than those gangs who engage in violent, serious crime (White 2002). In relation to the latter group, research has consistently found a relationship between illegal substance use, violent behaviour and gang membership, although the causal relationship between these is unclear (Bjerregard 2008). This relationship leads to a propensity for gang members to be targeted by police (Melde et al. 2011), an outcome that can contribute to the overrepresentation of some groups in the criminal justice system. The overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the NT criminal justice system is well documented and has not improved in recent years (Cunneen 2006). In order to effectively address this problem in a community such as Wadeye, it is important to determine what gang membership means to people and how this association provides for their social and individual needs. Therefore, this Wadeye case study provides an additional perspective to the generally held perceptions of gang-type activity, such as illegal drug use and violent behaviour, in that it examines what support gangs may provide in terms of social networks for young people as they grapple with progression to adulthood in a turbulent multicultural environment (White 2007).

The result of these networks and connections is that communities may tend to perceive that youth gangs develop as a result of social problems, not as an initial cause of them (Major et al. 2004). This perception has important implications for how the community reacts to gang members and the way in which they are treated by criminal justice agencies. This paper examines some of the perceived risk factors for gang involvement and incarceration and possible protective factors such as cultural affiliation and family support that may in the longer term enable some individuals to lead relatively positive lives (Ivory 2009).

Methodology

Survey

This study employed a mixed method approach utilising in-depth interviews of prisoners who were gang members, in

addition to a survey by field workers, which was assisted by local community members who had been working with the community for several years.

The survey sample was chosen by randomly selecting young people who attended the community gym and then using a snowballing technique to contact friends and associates of gym members. Additionally, the Australian Red Cross and the local Catholic School became involved and the Red Cross workers surveyed children who were attending school.

A primary affiliation and identity code for Aboriginal people at Wadeye is linkage to a particular clan group with associated land estate. There are 22 clans with members living in the town of Wadeye and the 'randomness' of the survey was substantiated in this respect by the diversity of individuals belonging to different clans.

The questionnaire was divided into several sections relating to home environment, education and employment, health and wellbeing, contact with the law, values and priorities, and community participation. The questions were designed with input from various quarters. The first draft was developed by researchers from Menzies School of Health Research, with input from the local Government Business Manager based at Wadeye. It was then presented to senior members of the Wadeye community for further comment, including Thamarrurr Incorporated and its leadership forum.

Respondents were asked who the most important people were to them, who they turned to for advice and support and who they respected. They were also asked about their personal substance use and whether substance use was of concern to them. In relation to offending behaviour, they were asked if they had been in police custody or had attended court. They were also asked if they were a member of a gang. In order to examine the characteristics of gang and non-gang members in relation to their involvement with violence, substance use and the criminal justice system, an analysis of the relative risk ratio was undertaken. The relative risk is a ratio of event probabilities and for this analysis indicates the probability/risk of a characteristic occurring for a particular group. SPSS (Version 19) was

used to generate Chi square for statistical significance and a 95 percent confidence interval for the risk ratio.

Prisoner interviews

In order to add to qualitative data to describe the context of the youth gang phenomena, gang members were interviewed who were incarcerated in Darwin Correctional Centre. Prisoners were asked about their gang life experience, including descriptions of what it meant to belong to a gang, leadership in gangs and possible diversionary programs that could be initiated to dissuade youth from engaging in gangs. Fifteen prisoners were approached and a total of eight volunteered to be interviewed; their ages ranged from 21 to 49 years.

Results

Survey

The results of the community survey provide the opportunity to consider the members of the youth gangs from within a broader youth perspective. A total of 133 young people were surveyed (51.9% male and 48.1% female). Ages ranged from 12 to 30 years, with an average age of 17.9 years. Of the 133 participants, 44 (33.1%) stated that they were a gang member.

The initial analysis consisted of cross-tabulations to examine the social networks for gang and non-gang members in terms of who they respected, took advice from

and who was most important to them (see Table 1).

As shown in Table 1 there were no statistically significant differences between gang and non-gang members in terms of the importance of family and friends, as family was the first most important group of people for the majority of both gang and non-gang members (82.9% and 75.6%, not significant). A much smaller percentage of gang members than non-gang members stated that their friends were the first most important to them (6.3% and 25.9%, not significant), although this difference was not statistically significant. However, gang members were statistically significantly more likely to take advice from friends than were non-gang members ($\chi^2(1)=13.17, p<.001$).

In terms of respect for authority, only one respondent (a non-gang member) said they did not respect their parents and only three (2 of whom were gang members) said they did not respect elders in the community. Gang members respected gang leaders significantly more than did non-gang members ($\chi^2(1)=36.93, p>.001$).

Therefore, in terms of gang membership, there were no significant differences in relation to the importance of and respect for family members and elders, particularly in relation to the level of respect, which was nearly unanimous for both groups. Interestingly, however, although the majority of gang members stated that their friends were not the first most important group of

Table 1 Values, social support and respect for authority for gang and non-gang members

	Gang members (n=45)		Non-gang members (n=88)		Significance
	n	%	n	%	
Values—most important people					
Family most important	40	90.9	83	93.3	ns
Friends most important	31	70.5	59	66.3	ns
Advice and support					
Advice from parents	39	86.7	68	77.3	ns
Advice from friends	38	84.4	45	51.1	<.001
Advice from relatives	30	66.7	59	67.0	ns
Advice from elders	14	31.1	26	29.5	ns
Admiration and respect for authority					
Respect parents	Only one respondent did not respect their parents (non-gang member)				
Respect elders	Only three respondents did not respect elders (2 were gang members)				
Respect gang leaders	28	66.7	12	14.5	<.001
Respect police	18	41.9	24	28.2	ns

Note: ns=not significant

Table 2 Gang member characteristics—relative risk ratios

	Risk for cohort in a gang=yes/no (n=133)	Confidence interval 95%	Significance
Demographics			
Male/female	2.28	1.32 to 3.94	<.01
Age<=18yrs/18yrs+	1.15	.72 to 1.91	ns
Substance use—personal			
Use tobacco (yes)	1.22	.71 to 1.8	ns
Use gunja	2.35	1.24 to 4.44	<.01
Use grog	1.56	.70 to 3.49	ns
Substance use—others			
Worry grog (yes)	.86	.41 to 1.84	ns
Worry gunja	.80	.40 to 1.59	ns
Violence/personal safety			
Worry family fight (yes)	1.00	.84 to 1.20	ns
Worry bullying	1.44	.92 to 2.27	ns
Been beaten up	1.30	.69 to 2.46	ns
Been threatened	3.37	1.76 to 6.47	<.001
Considered self-harm	.90	.44 to 1.83	ns
Criminal activity			
Been arrested (yes)	1.93	.94 to 3.95	<.05
In police cells	3.90	1.42 to 10.71	<.01
In court	3.86	1.40 to 10.58	<.01

Note: ns=not significant

people for them, they used their friends for advice and support to a significantly greater extent than did non-gang members.

In order to examine the characteristics of gang and non-gang members in relation to their involvement with violence, substance use and the criminal justice system, a comparison of gang and non-gang members was conducted.

Gang members were twice as likely to be male (2.28, $p<.01$) and to use gunja (2.35, $p<.01$) than were non-gang members. In terms of personal violence, they were three times more likely to have been threatened (3.37, $p<.001$; see Table 2).

In relation to criminal activity, gang members were nearly twice as likely to have been arrested (1.93, $p<.05$) and three times as likely to have been in police cells (3.90, $p<.01$) or to have made a court appearance (3.86, $p<.01$).

Therefore, gang members were more at risk of engaging in traditionally gang-type behaviours than were non-gang members in terms of illegal substance use, violent behaviour and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Prisoner interviews

Most interviewees noted that they didn't want to join a gang but had to due to kin obligation. The gang chose the individual rather than the individual choosing the gang. Even though gang members say they can leave their gangs, it is hard to due to a sense of obligation. There are non-kin members too, but the majority of the older gangs are kin based. The very close connection to kin was repeatedly stated by all interviewees, as well as respect for kin relations and obligations to kin. You are not forced to join a gang by your kin but you are obliged to.

...[I have] cousin brothers in Metallica Boys. A family gang. They my family. Full blood...40–50 people—all cousin brothers...Didn't want to join gang but had to, not made to but had to.

Became a member from a young kid, 21 years old. Cousins and brothers...[in gangs]

No choice but to be a gang member. Family thing. But don't want kids and grandson to go to jail [being in a gang equates with going to prison].

I was sick of being part of a gang. Didn't want to get involved. I did because I had to follow my brothers and cousins.

You are born into a gang and join when you're a young boy. Women also have a role in the gang. Newer gangs are not so rigid on kin membership, having kin separated across different gangs, but the older gangs such as Evil Warriors and Judas Priest value kin membership more.

Culture was very much at the root of gangs. One interviewee who is a gang leader stated that

[Gangs are] not gangs but tribes. If you're born into it you have to be in a gang due to the old tribal stuff. Gang leader means doing ceremony. Not gang but tribe—just described as gangs. Tribes means culture means go through law and ceremony. Lot going on. Evil Warriors and Judas Priest [family based gangs] started about in the 1980s. Each has the same language group.

Also important is country and territory. The gangs are defined within certain territories. Protecting territory was a main reason for gang violence and the gangs are connected to different areas of country in and around Wadeye.

Evil Warriors [territory] from Belyuen to Kununurra—have salt water elders. Fresh water from Palumpa to Timber Creek—have elders too. Only Wadeye has gangs.

[Fighting is] territory based. The bottom camp are fresh water and the top camp are salt water. They have different languages.

[I] have cousins and brothers in fresh water but main connections to salt water. Times when fresh water and salt water help each other out and other times trouble.

In the discourse of the prisoners, this fighting to protect land is coloured by heroic imagery and is given the status of a long-standing history. In the example below, the history of the dispute appears to far precede the provenance of the gang name (Judas Priest formed in 1969).

I have been in the gang for 20 years. There are about 8 gangs in Wadeye.

Fear Factory is also a fresh water tribe. Fighting between Judas Priest and Evil Warriors has gone back since 1935 for land.

An important emergent theme in the interviews was the difference between gangs who understood culture and history and the values of the young gang members. From their own and others' interpretation, a primary motivation was not the perpetuation of culture, but the avoidance of it:

When ceremony due, they start trouble to avoid ceremony. Prison is a hiding place. Don't wanna know about tribal law. But feel weak when we miss family in here (Imprisoned gang member).

Young people don't have culture. Go to Don Dale (Juvenile Justice Centre in Darwin). Run away from ceremony—don't want to go to ceremony. New gangs don't work like old gangs. New gangs not through ceremony and culture (Imprisoned gang member)

The tension that exists between the new and old gangs is an important issue in relation to how the community views gang members and how these gangs relate to each other, how they contribute to the continuation of traditional culture and if indeed that is what they intend.

The main goals and aspirations of the interviewees were based on ways to get out of gang life and keep others, especially other youth, out of gangs. There were a number of suggestions about how to do this:

Got to keep them busy; footy only sport; need work—housing, road works, night patrol, ranger—plenty of work if you want it. Basketball and baseball for women. Need programs to help youth. Lots of domestic violence, gunja, sniffing, can, petrol, fighting, angry—need anger management—relational problems, grog. Lot of young start sniffing after finish school. Nothing to do after school—danger period. Good during high school, but young boy and girl smoking at school.

I've been in prison 9 years all up—nothing here. But can play music. Be good role model. Tell story in language and song. Teach kids though music. Tell them about prison.

New life—go back to workshop.

Different life—stay away from friends. Kids aged 20, 20 something, 17yr old not in gang—ready for ceremony. Had enough of prison life.

Need intervention at school.

Get back to culture when get home: hunting, dancing, song.

Hunting and culture, stop gangs, get a job—plenty of jobs, education, keep kids in school eg his son, learn to read and write English, young mob don't speak English much because don't go to school, 7 languages.

[When I get out] I'm gonna say bad stuff about prison to get kids to [change their views] and get them off their back.

Try to talk one to one; program to talk to elders, gang members need work, young kids go back to school. The bus driver picks them up; culture and respect together; gangs hide from culture. Talk to group of young kids, my family, about prison and how bad it is. Get ideas from prison. Who can help?

People want me to keep playing music—even boss one. Wants to teach him to sing. Play music to help settle people down. I think music can change things—cross territories. Band travels around all territories of Wadeye—breaks boundaries.

Going back bush after prison to outstation—leave gang—family outstation—Dad find job—He's in Port Keats at the moment. Build new houses.

These interviews indicated that there was concern for the future of young people in the community and that they needed to be provided with more activities, more support from community members and more cultural experiences to deter them from the criminal justice system or to provide diversions for those who had already become part of it.

Discussion

The reasons behind the emergence of the gangs in Wadeye are debatable and complex. One explanation is that the trend was related to the establishment of musical bands in the 1980s, which were loosely

made up of kinfolk from particular areas.

These groups, it is proposed by some, later developed activities beyond music, grew in size and eventually evolved into 'gang' type structures. Other 'theories' are that Bruce Lee movies, cowboy movies and gang movies shown at a local open air theatre spawned the gang structures. Nevertheless, their emergence correlated to a particular period in the community's history when the population was rapidly growing, houses became overcrowded, there were few job opportunities and a sense of futility about the future was pervading the town. There had also emerged a degree of tension between the 'old' and the 'new' ways—older and middle-aged people and the emerging youth generation.

This research required a methodological unpacking of the gang concept, which revealed that it is extremely complex and that the criminal aspects of gang membership may be less important than such factors as identity construction, experiments with leadership and preservation of knowledge about culture and history. Differences were also found between the values of the older established gangs and those of the emergent gangs. Members of the older gangs based their gang structure on traditional culture and values; they saw their membership as part of a 'tribe' rather than a 'gang'. Younger gangs however were more focused on western attitudes and values. These differences result in conflict between groups based on the recognition and acceptance, or not, of traditional values and culture within kinship groups across the community.

The profile of gang members in the remote Indigenous community of Wadeye compares to some extent with gang members in other environments, such as urban communities in Australia and overseas. Their exposure to personal violence, drug use and the criminal justice system is similar to that in other social environments, as is the reliance on friends for advice and support, and respect for gang leaders. However, in relation to the level of respect for others around them, all the young people surveyed respected their parents. Therefore, unlike risk factors identified in earlier research, gang membership did not appear to be linked with a weakening of these 'conventional

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bonds' (Howell & Egely 2005: 337). The continuing importance of the family for gang members and the fact that members said family and friends were the most important thing about the gang, points to the need to treat Aboriginal youth within their family context, given that the gang can be so central to young people's lives (Bell & Heathcote 1999). In this context, the development of 'anti-gang' strategies

that do not reflect, and respect family considerations are bound not only to fail, but also to reproduce the worst aspects of oppressive colonial rule (White 2009: 48).

Interventions therefore need to encompass the perspective of 'gang as family' and therefore to promote it, not as a problem entity but as a family network (White 2009). These factors need to form an integral part of the development and sustainability of any prevention or intervention programs for young people in this community, in recognition that in this context there is a complex relationship and dependency between the gang, the family and the wider community.

Conclusions and policy implications for interventions

During the time this research report was developed (2011–12), local elders in the Wadeye community were gathering their thoughts and seeking conversation with government and their young people about alternatives to help break the cycles of early school leaving, incarceration, joblessness and hopelessness. The clear priority among these elders was to find ways of interesting

young people in contemporary cultural practices and various motivating activities that could harness the strong energy within the gangs.

While some youth were tentative about 'going on country' with elders, others were keen. The pattern here was to introduce senior adolescents to their clans' homeland areas and to explore the places and stewardship roles for which they were inheriting responsibilities. These connections to country could lead to ongoing cultural and spiritual maintenance, but also potential mainstream vocations in caring for country, ranger work, revegetation programs and weed removal, plus possible tourism in the future.

The implications for youth justice policies and programs are clear—supporting local elders and younger adult mentors to guide young people into positive activities for gangs to undertake will be more fruitful than directing energies at costly incarceration and management of recidivism.

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